



Stress Overview



Definition of Stress: Stress is a response to challenges and changes in life that your brain interprets as a call to prepare for action. Adrenaline and stress hormones are released that activate your body (“**fight or flight**”), and affect your actions, your thoughts, and your emotions. Stress helps to protect you, but it can be unhealthy if it continues for a long time. Too much stress can also interfere with your performance. Stress-related physical changes include:

- Increased blood pressure and heart rate.
- Rapid breathing.
- Sweating.
- Stomach muscles contracting, causing “butterflies,” cramps, diarrhea.
- Muscle tension.



Mental Reframing: Everyone has a stream of private thoughts running through their minds. This is called **self-talk**. These thoughts reflect your beliefs and attitudes about the world, other people, and yourself, and they may be adding to your stress. To interrupt the automatic thought process:

- Become aware—monitor your thoughts and self-talk.
- Recognize that thoughts cause feelings and motivate behavior. There is rarely a direct link between the stressful situation and your response. In fact, it’s usually not the event or situation that leads to a stress reaction; **it’s your interpretation of the event or situation** that causes you to respond in various ways.

The sequence of events that leads to feelings and behaviors in response to stressors is called the “**ABCs**”:

$$(A)ctivating event + (B)eliefs = (C)onsequences$$

A —You experience the **Activating** event.

B — Your **Beliefs** about the event lead to an interpretation of the event.

C — Your interpretation of the event either increases or decreases the stress you feel—the **Consequences**.

POTENTIAL LONG-TERM EFFECTS OF CHRONIC STRESS

- Hypertension (high blood pressure).
 - Heart disease.
- Immune system suppression.
- Increased risk for infectious disease.
- Gastrointestinal disorders such as colitis.
 - Asthma.
- Mental health problems.

QUICK STRESS-REDUCTION TECHNIQUES

When you feel stressed, your breathing becomes fast and shallow and your muscles get tense. You can interrupt the stress response by:

1. Slowing your breathing and taking deep, slow breaths from your belly.
2. Relaxing your muscles (e.g., by tensing and releasing muscles throughout your body).



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Mental Reframing (cont.): Check your thoughts and self-talk for these stress-promoting thinking patterns:

1. **All-or-nothing thinking:** judging things as being all good or all bad usually based on a single factor.
2. **Exaggeration:** blowing the negative consequences of a situation or event way out of proportion.
3. **Overgeneralization:** drawing conclusions about your whole life based on negative outcome of a single incident.
4. **Mind-reading:** believing you know what another person or group of people is thinking about you (usually bad) when you have no evidence.
 - Challenge your negative thoughts and self-talk by asking yourself whether there is evidence to support the way you are perceiving the situation.
 - Replace negative or stressful self-talk with more positive, useful, and realistic self-talk.

Example: While on leave, you decide to take the bus to go visit your family and get stuck in traffic due to road construction. Change **negative self-talk** (“This will take forever. I will never get home. Why does this always happen to me?”) to **positive and useful self-talk** (“I’m glad they are fixing this road. I can take this time to relax and listen to some music I enjoy.”).

IF A SOURCE OF STRESS IS BEYOND YOUR CONTROL

Try an activity to distract or soothe yourself:

- Listen to music.
- Get together with a friend.
- Read a good book or watch a movie.
- Engage in physical exercise.
- Consider spiritual activity such as prayer.
- Perform yoga.
- Use humor (jokes or funny movies).
- Meditate.
- Take a nap.
- Write in a journal or diary.
- Take a hot bath or shower.
- Help others in need.
- Express your stress creatively.
- Take a “mental holiday.”

Controlling the Source of Stress by Solving Problems:

Take action over stressors that you can control (your own habits, behavior, environment, relationships) by using the problem-solving process:

- Step 1:** Define the problem.
- Step 2:** Set a goal (e.g., what would you like to see happen?).
- Step 3:** Brainstorm possible solutions.
- Step 4:** Evaluate the pros and cons of various possible solutions.
- Step 5:** Choose the best solution (weigh the pros and cons).
- Step 6:** Make a plan to implement the solution and try it!
- Step 7:** Assess how well it went.
- Step 8:** If the first solution doesn’t work, try others.

PLAN FOR FUTURE STRESSFUL EVENTS

Create a personalized “Stress Toolkit” by making a list of coping strategies that work for you when you’re stressed, including deep breathing, muscle relaxation and activities that you find soothing.

Visualize potential future stressful situations.

Determine if you will have some control in the situation.

Decide how you will use the problem-solving process to reduce stressors.

Plan to use various helpful activities to reduce the stress response.

Remember to include friends and family for support.